

A COMPLEX IDENTITY: RED COLOR-CODING IN ALAI'S *RED POPPIES*

Alexandra Draggeim (The Ohio State University)

ABSTRACT

Alai's *Red Poppies* presents a complex depiction of Tibetan identity that is at odds with the romanticized portrayal of the Tibetan minority in Chinese government media as well as with the standard historical positioning of Old Tibet as feudal and primitive. The color red is an ongoing theme that recurs throughout the novel, from the original introduction of the red poppies, to their spread throughout the area surrounding the Maichi chiefdom and, finally, to the chiefdom's downfall, offering insight not only into the complexity of Sino-Tibetan relations, but also into tension between Tibetan self-perception and popular image. Using a color frequently associated with Red China to highlight diverse cultural themes, Alai's work provides us a valuable window into marginal Tibetan realms outside of Central Tibet.

KEYWORDS

Alai, metaphor, poppies, red, *Red Poppies*, Tibet

INTRODUCTION¹

Published first in 1998 in Chinese and then in English in 2002, *Red Poppies*,² originally *Chen'ai luoding* 'The Dust Settles', is a highly acclaimed work of modern Chinese fiction by the Tibetan author Alai. The novel's multi-layered plot centers on the fate of the last Maichi chieftain, a local overlord in the Sino-Tibetan corridor, and is told from the point of view of the overlord's 'idiot' son. *Red Poppies* presents the reader with a variety of complex themes, from the hybrid identity of the half-Tibetan author as projected onto the narrator, to the interaction between Tibetans and Han Chinese. At the same time, the color red, whether as part of the description of Tibetan material culture or as the dominant characteristic of the powerful poppies, is a unifying thematic strand that runs from the opening chapters to the bloody end of the Maichi dynasty.

Central to the novel is the red poppy itself

its giant blossoms rapidly reddening the gray area between the white and black lands ... not only a hallucinogen and an aphrodisiac but also a biological metaphor and color code for a new form of Chinese colonization ... Red Chinese now prescribe their red utopia as a more effective opiate than red poppies (Choy 2008:229).

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² I base my analysis on the English translation of *Red Poppies* by Howard Goldblatt and Sylvia Li-chun Lin (2002). Although the translation certainly differs from the original, the translators nevertheless preserve numerous color-related metaphors. For this reason, all quotations of the novel itself are taken directly from the translated version. Here is a translated passage followed by the original as an illustration of the translators' fidelity to Alai's metaphorical language: "People said she would give birth to a crazy baby, since the mad, raging love between her and the chieftain had nearly turned them both to ashes" 人们都说, 那样疯狂的一段感情, 把大人都差点烧成了灰, 生下来会是一个疯子吧 (2). Both passages refer to ashes; the Chinese states, literally "[it] almost burned them to ashes." Another example, from the same section, is "flames of madness must have shown in my eyes" 我的眼睛里肯定燃烧着疯狂的火苗 (2). In the latter example, "mad tongues of flame" in the Chinese is rendered as "flames" in the translation.

The arrival of the Red Chinese in the Maichi region leads to a clearer differentiation not only among, but also within ethnic groups. Previously, the narrator had viewed the Tibetans as a group of people with some common cultural characteristics and common interests, yet the appearance of the Han creates a more competitive relationship among different tribes. Divisions among Han Chinese crystallize as well. After the arrival of the 'colored Chinese' in Chapter Forty, politically-based distinctions become even more prominent among the Red Chinese and the White Chinese, even though both political subgroups belong to the same ethnicity.

The color red links the narrator's personal identity with Tibetan identity as a whole. Red is the mad passion that gave rise to the idiot-narrator; red is the color of Han poppies and Communist ideology. Moreover, the progression of red-related symbolism highlights the complex nature of the Maichi decline. On the one hand, the destruction is internal, and the narrator eventually dies at the hand of a fellow Tibetan. On the other hand, external destruction in the form of opium and Western-style weapons is introduced by the Han Chinese. *Red Poppies* takes place in the decade leading up to the 1949 revolution, yet its Jiarong Tibetan³ leaders are unaware that opium had been a source of difficulties and humiliation for the Qing Dynasty more than one hundred years earlier.⁴ The Tibetan lifestyle, largely unchanged by the Opium Wars and the fall of the Qing Dynasty, is suddenly shaken by foreign influences. The Han, having

³ Jiarong Tibetans reside in northern Sichuan Province and are considered to be part of the Tibetan nationality according to the official PRC classification. They regard themselves as descendants of the "eighteen tribes of Jinchuan" and now refer to themselves as Tibetan (G. yu lha 2012:27). Some scholars believe that Jiarong Tibetans are descendants of Tibetans and Qiang people dating back to when Tibetans moved eastward in the Tang Dynasty (see De 2004). Now generally considered a Tibetan subgroup, the Jiarong are at the same time somewhat Sinified.

⁴ See Schell and Delury (2013) for an in-depth account of how Chinese intellectuals struggled to balance China's political tradition with the need to adapt modern Western principles to become a world power. China's primary goal was to abolish the opium trade, which was draining the national supply of silver and sickening the population.

lost their own battle against opium and foreign weapons, bring them to Tibet, drawing upon the foreign commodities as a source of power, transforming from the colonized to colonizers.

I will examine how the color red and red-related metaphors, in the sense of Lakoff and Johnson (1980), represent the complex and fluid Jiarong Tibetan identity. The treatment of identity in the novel is interesting in that the story is told through the eyes of a Jiarong youth, presenting a unique emic perspective. Such a perspective is rarely seen in fictional as well as in academic works by Chinese scholars,⁵ even those who are ethnically Tibetan, as they predominantly focus on linguistic or historical characteristics.⁶ The manner in which red-related metaphors are constructed is reminiscent of the techniques used in magical realism and contributes to the modernist qualities of the work (Schiaffini-Vedani 2008). This modernist feel is reinforced by Howard Goldblatt and Sylvia Li-chun Lin's translation, which, through a variety of translation choices, creates the feeling of a work suspended in time and space. Although I predominantly approach this work through examples from the English translation, most metaphors remain unchanged by translation.

The connection between red metaphors and a diversity of cultural themes undermines the now-common association in mainstream Chinese media of red with a unified New China,

⁵ Here, 'Chinese' refers to scholars who are citizens of the People's Republic of China and thus includes Chinese citizens who are ethnically Tibetan. In discussing Alai's work, it is important to specify that one is discussing Tibetans and Han Chinese, who comprise two distinct ethnic groups, rather than Tibetans and Chinese citizens. 'Tibetan' here refers to those who are ethnically Tibetan, rather than those residing in the Tibet Autonomous Region, as many ethnically Tibetan areas are located in the neighboring provinces of Qinghai and Sichuan. The various ways in which these terms can be used reflect conflicting political and cultural realities.

⁶ Li (1997), for example, examines relationships between Jiarong Tibetans and other ethnic groups and details the rule of the eighteen Jiarong chieftains, working closely with Chinese historical records. Other works, such as Qu (1990) and (Sun 2003), focus on analyzing the linguistic aspects of the Jiarong dialect. Jacques has also made a significant contribution to Jiarong language classification and research (2008).

consisting of a Han core and fifty-five harmonious minorities, including Tibetans: happy, willing, naïve subjects of the PRC.⁷ Outside of the post-1949 Chinese ethnic paradigm, which was largely based on Stalin's definitions of a nation,⁸ Alai appropriates red-related symbolic discourse for his own purposes: emphasizing and highlighting, not simplifying, diversity and historical complexity. Rather than emphasizing unity and clear ethnic distinctions, Alai writes about a borderland region with allegiances both to the Emperor and to Lhasa. It is neither the Shangri La idealized by some Westerners, nor the backward, primordial society in official discourse of the Chinese government.⁹ *Red Poppies* even brings into question our notion of Tibet, which does not appear to be as unified and monolithic in the novel as we may imagine.¹⁰

⁷ For instance, in the late 1980s, the Chinese government sponsored pictorials depicting Tibetans happily voting, or on the Great Wall with the caption "I love the Great Wall" (Gladney 1998:97).

⁸ Stalin (1952) defined a nation as a historically formed, stable community of people with a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up.

⁹ For an example of standard government policy, see the website of the Chinese Internet Information Center (www.china.org.cn). The first sentence on the page about feudal serfdom in Old Tibet states:

Before the Democratic Reform of 1959 Tibet had long been a society of feudal serfdom under the despotic religion-political rule of lamas and nobles, a society which was darker and more cruel than the European serfdom of the Middle Ages. (<http://www.china.org.cn/e-white/tibet/9-4.htm>)

¹⁰ Tuttle (2010:32) presents evidence of Tibetan communities that, while maintaining communication with each other, were distinct in terms of local culture and ethnic composition. He notes that these multilingual, multiethnic borderland communities had students who studied in Lhasa and occupied important religious posts, but also monks who served at the court in Beijing and taught in Inner Mongolia.

ALAI AND HYBRIDITY

The identity of the narrator, who was born to a Han mother and Tibetan father, is similar to that of the author. Alai was born in 1959 in Aba Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province to Tibetan and Hui¹¹ parents, but self-identifies as a Tibetan (Thurston 2007:1-2). Before becoming a professional writer, Alai worked as a teacher of Mandarin and is married to a Han woman, thus witnessing encounters between Han and Tibetan cultures on a daily basis. Influenced by two different societies, Alai is a 'culturally hybrid' author who chooses to write in Mandarin. Like the 'culturally hybrid' Yi writers described by Luo (2001), Alai narrates his Tibetan tale in a manner that makes it accessible to a larger Han audience. Luo notes that Mandarin and Han culture can facilitate the dissemination of local stories and experiences. Similarly, Alai feels more comfortable writing in Mandarin, in which he received his education, and views it as more suitable for writing modern fiction for several reasons, including his belief that Tibetan is "too tied to classical Tibetan" (Wang 2013:98). He is a cultural hybrid from a professional perspective as well, occupying the official post of Chairman, Sichuan Branch of the Chinese Writers' Association, but writes about personal, localized, and ecologically situated experiences of Sichuan Tibetans.

Like Alai, the narrator is born to parents of different ethnic and social backgrounds, his mother having come to the chieftom as a prostitute presented as a gift to the chieftain by a Chinese trader: "trapped between Tibetanness and Chineseness, nobility and lowliness, his ethnic and class status – two of the key components that constitute an identity – are problematic" (Choy 2008:230). In the morning, during the transition between sleep and reality, the 'idiot' narrator is often preoccupied with the questions, "Who am I? Where am I?" (Alai 2002:204-5). In fact, not only is the narrator displaying aspects of an ambiguous identity, but so are those around him, transforming from lover to maidservant, from executioner to

¹¹ The Hui, one of China's fifty-six officially recognized ethnic groups, are a predominantly Muslim people who live mostly in western China.

photographer, from priest to historian. These changes to new, often inherently modern roles sometimes take place suddenly in an otherwise realistic narration. For example, the monk Wangpo Yeshi loses his tongue as punishment for proselytizing Gelug doctrine¹² but is immediately deemed the new Maichi family historian (Alai 2002:168). They are atypical in a hierarchical society where professions such as that of the butcher are strictly hereditary. Perhaps the insertion of these fantastical changes underlines a general shift in Jiarong society and the Jiarong Tibetans' precarious position in time and space, between ancient times and modernity, Beijing and Lhasa.¹³

Of course, it is the narrator who proclaims himself to be an idiot and is viewed as such by his friends and family; thus, his voice cannot be assumed to represent other characters' perception of reality. Nevertheless, rather than constituting true madness, his 'insanity' imbues him with a certain wisdom,¹⁴ allowing him to raise important questions, and giving the narrator a degree of freedom in his decisions and interaction with others.

Alai's cultural hybridity is not uncommon among contemporary Chinese authors. His background is similar to that of

¹² The Dalai Lama is the most well-known representative of the Gelug Sect, founded by Tsong kha pa (1357-1419). It is also known as the 'Yellow Sect', because lamas who belong to this sect wear yellow hats (Ling 2004:72). The fact that the chieftain was resistant to Gelug doctrine preached by Wangpo Yeshi further emphasizes the Jiarong area's status as a borderland, culturally distant from both Lhasa and the east.

¹³ Jiarong Tibetans predominantly inhabit Aba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province. They are not the only ethnically Tibetan sub-group who live in a borderland region. The ethnically Tibetan villagers in Suopo Township, Danba County, Sichuan Province, for example, also perceive themselves as marginalized Tibetans and have appropriated this idea to emphasize their distinctiveness from other Tibetan groups, carving out a "new space for their survival, cultural expressions, identity construction, and political positioning" (Tenzin Jinba 2014:7).

¹⁴ Thurston (2007:43-69) points out that the fool is actually a traditional social pariah character type commonly used by Alai in his works. In *Red Poppies*, the narrator-fool is characterized by many surprising manifestations of wisdom.

Zhaxi Dawa, born in 1959 in a Tibetan area of western Sichuan to a Tibetan mother and Han father. While self-identifying as a Tibetan, Alai attended Chinese schools and did not learn to speak Tibetan or consciously embrace Tibetan culture until he was an adult (Schiaffini-Vedani 2008:204). The state of hybridity may be related to the genre of magical realism, as suggested by Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani, who presents magical realist writing as a natural response to hybridity, a way for Chinese-educated writers to make sense of their native culture (2008:209). Zhaxi Dawa commented on the contradictory complexities of Tibet (quoted in Schiaffini-Vedani 2008:210):

As soon as a writer enters deeply into modern Tibet, s/he will come to forget that what is in front of her/his eyes is reality. S/he will think that it seems more a product of a hallucinating imagination.

Just as Latin American author Gabriel Garcia Marquez wrote in the style of magical realism to react against social realism, perhaps Alai and Zhaxi Dawa are, in effect, reacting against a very dichotomous portrayal of Old Tibet either as a peaceful, pure society or as a backward and violent one in the Chinese state-sponsored media, Hollywood,¹⁵ and Chinese government propaganda.¹⁶ Using complex and fantastical elements to dilute this standard framework, Alai inserts absurd episodes masked by the narrator's 'idiot' identity, undermining the reader's trust in the narrator's perception of reality.

¹⁵ For a discussion of popular perceptions of Tibet in the Western media, see Schell's (2000) description of idealistic and nearly religiously positive perceptions of Tibet among Hollywood stars, intellectuals, and the general public.

¹⁶ The Chinese government presents a view of Tibet diametrically opposed to that of Hollywood enthusiasts. For example, the Chinese Central Newsreel and Documentary Film Studio produced *Xizang wangshi* [*Tibet's Past*] in 2007. This short film highlights the poverty, backwardness, and slave-centered agricultural system of pre-1950 Tibet, themes commonly emphasized in centrally controlled media. In contrast, the narrator of the BBC-produced film *The Lost World of Tibet: A Different View* nostalgically remarks: "[the footage used in this video allows] us to glimpse into a world which has almost entirely disappeared, to a time before the Dalai Lama and his people lost their country."

RED IN TIBETAN CULTURE

One reason for choosing red as a focal metaphor in my analysis is its central role in both Tibetan and Han culture, which also allows Alai to use red in novel, sometimes conflicting ways to juxtapose the two cultures. In Han culture, red is a color related to celebration, the Spring Festival, marriage, and, more recently, New China.¹⁷ According to the *Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs* by Robert Beer, the color red in Buddhist art represents the "sun's inexhaustible fire," whereas "[t]he sun, as a symbol of pure wisdom, is consumed with fire, yet is not itself consumed. Its external fire is inexhaustible" (Beer 1999:17). Like the Buddhist sun, the sun in *Red Poppies* is a source of wisdom for both the idiot-son and his alter-ego, the Buddhist priest Wangpo Yeshi, who often gaze up at the blazing sun while contemplating philosophical questions. The priest-turned-historian likes to sit under the sun with a bowl of liquor, while the narrator often becomes aware of himself and his surroundings only after sun rays penetrate his room: "I woke up with the sun flickering in my eyes, and discovered that I was sleeping in my childhood room in the very bed I'd slept in as a boy" (Alai 2002:423). As the novel progresses, one senses impending doom - a day when the Tibetan sun, a source of wisdom and enlightenment, will set for the last time and the violent red sun of New China will rise in the sky.

Fire as a Tibetan symbol can be both a creator and a destroyer: "[E]ach *kalpa*, or cosmic cycle of the universe, is believed to end in a penultimate destruction by flood, wind, or fire" (Beer 1999:17). A *kalpa* is infinitely long, and is metaphorically described as the time it takes to empty a ten-mile-square city full of poppy seeds by removing a poppy seed every year (Baroni 2002:174); its end is

¹⁷Mao Zedong famously linked the idea of fire with the destruction of old society when he used the Chinese saying "a single spark can start a prairie fire" in a 1930 letter to Lin Biao describing how the fire of revolution will soon sweep across China and prepare the ground for construction of a New China (Mao 1972:65-76).

often related to red, fiery destruction in Tibetan artwork.¹⁸ When the seemingly endless Maichi lineage is brought to an end under a barrage of fiery artillery shells, their sound is compared to a screaming human voice, evoking images of chaos and terror: "the shriek of artillery fire cut through the air again" (Alai 2002:425). Similarly, the red poppies allow the Maichi family to monopolize food production and acquire incredible wealth, but at the same time subjugate it to the economic demands of the Han government. Thus, red, linked culturally and artistically to fire and to the sun, is a central theme in the novel, highlighted not only by its prominence in the English translation of the title, but also by its connection to several other central symbols and metaphors.

Furthermore, red is also a symbol of the Nyingma Sect of Tibetan Buddhism, also known as the 'Old School' or Red Hat Sect after the red ceremonial hats used by Nyingma monks. It was founded by an Indian monk who migrated to Tibet. Nyingma teachings also assimilated elements of Bon, an indigenous religion that assimilated elements of Buddhism after Buddhism was introduced into Tibet (Stoddard 2013:90). The Gelug Sect became the dominant religious tradition in Tibet until the area was invaded in the mid-20th century. Wangpo Yeshe is a monk of the Gelug Sect, and his beliefs starkly contrast with those of the chieftain, who belongs to the Nyingma Sect (Thurston 2007:77). Wangpo Yeshe, an outside force struggling against local tradition, adheres to the official religious doctrine promoted by Lhasa and is ostracized by the Maichi chieftain. Their different worldviews serve to further underscore the cultural and religious differences between Lhasa and the Jiarong area.

TIBETAN MATERIAL CULTURE AT A CULTURAL CROSSROADS

Red is addressed not only metaphorically, but also concretely as an important color attributed to various Tibetan artifacts. Red objects

¹⁸ For example, a deity is described as having "three eyes blaze like the fire at the end of a *kalpa*" in Richardson (1983:56).

figure prominently in the novel, often as a focal point of attention in a description of the material richness of Jiarong culture. At the same time, they highlight the complex identity of Jiarong Tibetans living at a cultural crossroads, emphasized by the juxtaposition of a dominating red and a palette of other colors.

At the center of the Maichi dining room is a gilded red table surrounded by "Persian rugs with lovely designs in the summer and bearskins in the winter"; dinnerware consists of silverware and coral wineglasses, and the table is decorated with candles from imported wax (Alai 2002:120). The scene is depicted as if it were a photograph of the dining room, a sampling of the Maichi family's riches from all corners of the world. Traditional red Tibetan art is supplemented with a broad spectrum of colorful international items. A similar blend of Han materials and Tibetan craftsmanship is embodied by a red fruit platter:

Rectangular wooden crimson platters decorated with gilded fruit in strange shapes and giant flowers said to be popular in India had been placed before us. They contained porcelain from the Han area and silverware made by our silversmiths. The wineglasses were made of blood red Ceylonese agate (Alai 2002:346).

Yet another example of a focal point of Han-Tibetan contact is the red belt on the Maichi soldiers' uniforms on which bayonets can be sheathed (Alai 2002:111). Traditional Tibetan clothing is being used to hold up bayonets provided by the Han to the Tibetan soldiers. Interestingly, bayonets are not originally Han, but were brought to mainland China from the West, often along with firearms, via India or Burma in the southwest.¹⁹ Red Chinese, emboldened by their civil war victory, used tools once directed against the Qing to assert their influence in the region. Gaining military and political control of Tibet allowed the Han Chinese to lay the foundation for both a slave-liberation and majority-minority historical and cultural framework,

¹⁹ For example, in February 1949 the Tibetan government purchased a large supply of weapons from India in order to battle approaching Communist troops (Goldstein 1989:620).

later established by the PRC government as the dominant national ethnic paradigm.

LOVE AND MADNESS

Red is the color of significant objects, but also as a more literary metaphor representing a variety of universal themes. As previously mentioned, the narrator is born out of the love of his father for a Han prostitute, and it is suggested that his 'insanity' is caused by the unhealthy relationship between his parents: "people said she would give birth to a crazy baby, since the mad, raging love between her and the chieftain had nearly turned them both to ashes" (Alai 20002:101). Here, the term 'raging love' suggests the conceptual metaphor of 'love is fire', a destructive sort of fire. It is supplanted by the more traditional literary metaphor of the fire of love turning people to ashes. The fire that gave rise to the narrator can later be seen as a manifestation of his madness: "flames of madness must have shown in my eyes" (Alai 2002:229). Here, we can see that 'madness is fire'.

The theme of the danger of passionate, fiery love is evident in numerous instances. When the narrator encounters his wife after her affair with the neighboring chieftain, he notes that, "[Tharna was] cast aside after Wangpo had flung her into the flames of lust, in which she'd been badly burned" (Alai 2002:401). Here, the action of flinging someone into 'flames of lust' suggests not only destruction, but also the victim's helplessness and isolation.

The poppies, of course, are closely related to love and madness. They essentially trigger a series of tumultuous romantic relationships in the novel, including that of the narrator and his maidservant Dolma, and that of the chieftain and his second wife:

The poppies flourished beyond imagining, as we could see from the windows of the house. These plants, which were appearing on our land for the very first time, were so thrilling that they drew out the madness hidden in the people's marrow. Maybe it was their mysterious power that had caused the chieftain to fall so much in love with Yangzom ... And Yangzom, who had just buried her husband, was equally mad (Alai 2002:51).

Poppies play a central metaphorical role in Alai's novel, just as they do in a number of Western works.

POPPIES

In Western literature, poppies have been associated with a variety of mythological phenomena, notably Demeter, the goddess of fertility, and sleep. The poppy is said to be "perfused with Lethean sleep" (Ferber 1999:160). The poppy flower is also associated with oblivion, peaceful death, and, in the works of Oscar Wilde, eroticism (Ferber 1999:161). Such symbolism can be found in a variety of popular works, such as the 1939 cinematic classic *The Wizard of Oz*, in which Dorothy falls asleep in a field of enchanted poppies.

From the moment the poppy flowers open in *Red Poppies*, it is as if everyone is mesmerized by the beautiful poppies, which both empower the Maichi family and symbolize the government's ability to exercise an increasing amount of control on its fate:

[O]ne day the sprouts ripped through the ground and tender buds spread out to form thick leaves shaped like a baby's delicate hands ... When the poppies bloomed, the giant red flowers formed a spectacular carpet across much of Chieftain Maichi's territory. This plant captivated us. How lovely those poppies were! (Alai: 2002:46)

Aside from captivating the narrator with their beauty, the poppies also have a more practical and direct effect, for they increase the sexual desires of men in the Maichi family:

During that first summer, when the poppies took root in our land and produced beautiful flowers, a strange phenomenon occurred - both my father's and my brother's sexual appetites grew stronger than ever. My own desire, which had been awakened in the early spring, now exploded, fed by the vibrant red blossoms of summer (Alai 2002:48).

Here, we can trace two related metaphors: "desire is explosive" and "red blossoms are food." Poppies "feed" the desire in

the sense that they cause it to increase to the point of it being unbearable. Interestingly, the red poppies end up literally replacing planting ground for food after chieftains begin planting poppies instead of barley. The chieftains are misled by the poppies, which eventually fail to bring them revenue and lead to mass starvation.

It is after the arrival of the poppies that the Maichi chieftain grows mad with desire for his servant's wife, whom he takes to be his third wife after having murdered the servant. Meanwhile, he is punished for his act by the poppies, for while he and his third wife are drawn to the poppy field to seek refuge from prying eyes, they are constantly interrupted by people or creatures they encounter. Nevertheless, they still return to the poppy field, where, "with the wind blowing on the new plants, the berries surged in waves like raging sexual desire" (Alai 2002:51). The ripe berries, signaling the plant's readiness to reproduce, are echoed by the Maichi chieftain's own desire. Still unable to find a place to be with his wife, the chieftain is chased by chanting children, and, "as the chieftain's sexual desire turned to flames of rage, the executioner's whip drove off the screaming slaves" (Alai 2002:68). Here again, desire is being described as flames first ignited by the scarlet flowers, an unsatisfied desire avenged by violence.

Nevertheless, the flames of the poppies not only lead to increased desire, but increased chaos as well, masking the evil intentions of the government to the east. Huang, the Han emissary,

wanted to make one chieftain powerful so he could control the others, but Jiang intended for all chieftains to plant poppies, so he could supply them with silver and machine guns, which they would in turn use against one another. Shortly after he arrived, poppies raged like a fire on other chieftains' land (Alai 2002:170).

The poppies are dangerous and out of control, spreading quickly throughout the area. In the interplay between fatalism and free will, the wise Wangpo Yeshi reconciles the external consequences of the poppies with the inevitable internal decline of the Tibetan chiefdoms,

presenting the poppies as a catalyst for the inevitable. After telling the chieftain that the poppies are a torch that will ignite the Maichi estate, Wangpo answers the chieftain's question as to whether he should destroy the poppies: "That won't be necessary. Everything is predestined. The poppies will only make what must happen arrive sooner" (Alai 2002:168). Wangpo predicted the poppies' pivotal role in influencing balances of power in the region.

RED AS A VEHICLE FOR POWER

Fire and the color red are often connected in art and literature. Mastery of and control over fire provides servants of the Maichi estate with a sense of control and serves to increase the Maichi family's power by essentially attracting populations from neighboring estates to their side. While the narrator is managing a trading town on the border with a chiefdom in the midst of a famine, he orders the cook to roast barley, releasing its aroma and tempting the starving people. Of course, fire is central to the process:

Fire is a wonderful thing; it not only burned the grain, but enhanced its aroma by ten- or even a hundredfold, releasing it before the life inside the kernels was extinguished (Alai 2002:199).

We can see the universally common metaphor of 'life is fire', as the life inside the kernels, just as any human life, can be put to an end, or extinguished. This metaphor is consistent with the Chinese original, in which the verb *miewang* 'to extinguish', is used. The first syllable of this word literally means 'to put out'. Both the Chinese and English languages, in the phrase 'life is extinguished', allow and even demand the same conceptual metaphor.

When it is decided to feed the starving people, Dolma, the cook, hands out food ever more enthusiastically:

now Dolma had gotten a taste of power. I think she liked it; otherwise, she wouldn't have kept wielding the charitable ladle

even after she was tired and drenched in sweat (Alai 2002:245-6).

In a way, this is the result of a chain of power transfer with poppies as the top link. In this case, it is the *absence* of poppies and thus the presence of large amounts of barley that allows the Maichi family to subjugate its neighbors. In Daoist manner, using the absence of a thing here is more important than having it. Poppies, a tool for colonization, are used by the already economically trapped Jiarong Tibetans to control others. The Maichi become a middleman between the Han and other Tibetans, again playing an intermediary role consistent with their historical situation.

Related to power, violence is a way for the Maichi family to exercise certain forms of control; nevertheless, it is the poppies and control over their distribution that allows the Maichi family to manipulate power in the region most effectively. Traditional forms of Tibetan warfare cannot compete with larger socioeconomic forces and modern weaponry.

RED FOR VIOLENCE

Violent acts are an integral part of the everyday existence of the Maichi family, whose household has a permanent, hereditary executioner. Tasks performed by the executioner, such as cutting off the Buddhist priest's tongue as punishment, are described matter-of-factly, but without neglecting their contradictory nature, lending a feeling of grotesque magic to the job amid the overall realistic daily life of the family. Whereas executions are performed routinely and decisions about them made quickly, they are not without consequence:

Every time someone was executed, our household was shrouded in a strange atmosphere, even though everyone looked as normal as any other day ... Killing people was nothing we shied away from, but afterward, our hearts would still be uneasy ... if you still don't believe me, then you should share a meal with us

after the execution order is given. You'd see that we drank more water than usual and ate less food. The meat was hardly touched, maybe a symbolic bite or two at most (Alai 2002:106).

It is precisely this detached, absurd feeling surrounding executions that renders the descriptions of violence much more contextualized and nearly humanistic, avoiding a straightforward condemnation of the barbaric ways of Old Tibet.

Red is a prominent color used to symbolize violence, playing a decisive, manipulative role in numerous violent scenes. For example, after the poppy-stealing servant of the neighboring chieftain Wangpo is captured, "his head is cut off and placed in red cloth" (Alai 2002:130). It is this head that, through the Wangpo chieftain's cunning plan, the repatriated head is then planted, and poppies sprout from the ears. Apparently, the servant, knowing of his approaching end and foreseeing the Wangpo chieftain's actions, managed to hide poppy seeds in his ears. It is precisely the servant's bloody, gruesome execution that was necessary for Wangpo's plot to be carried to its completion. Almost perversely, the severed head provides an ideal environment for the germination of the red flowers.

In another instance, a robe stained with an executed man's blood turns from red to purple in the sun's rays. This seems to dominate the narrator's actions: "it wasn't me, but my purple garment, that felt like walking" (Alai 2002:324). This impacts not only his actions but also his perception of the surroundings:

Now everything before me was tinted with shades of purple. The river, the mountains, the fields, the estate house, the trees, and dry grass were all shrouded in a film of purple, with a tinge of slightly fading, aging blood red (Alai 2002:315).

The agency of the eerie garment is transferred to a potential murderer waiting outside. It is when the narrator flings his robe out through the window and it lands on the murderer by chance that the man decides to complete his deed and murder the Maichi chieftain's older son, because "the purple garment kept pushing him in the direction of the old chieftain's room" (Alai 2002:332).

The purple garment also serves to re-emphasize the almost absurd role of chance in the novel. It is simply because the robe happens to land on the murderer's head that he commits the deed. Likewise, at the end of the novel, the author just happens to ask his own potential murderer, brother of his brother's assassin, what his clan name is, once again raising a central questions related to identity: "What is your name?" (Alai 2002:433). It is this question alone that leads to the hesitating murderer to pierce his dagger into the narrator's body, paralleling the murder of the 'idiot's' older brother. Perhaps this second death is not truly a matter of chance. Perhaps the narrator, who has had a prophetic feeling about his approaching end, feels this is the moment and, maybe subconsciously, provides the motive for his own murder.

The effect of some violent episodes is softened with fantastical elements reminiscent of magical realism. The term 'magical realism', although sometimes criticized as a vestige of a post-colonialist mindset, is often applied to writers such as Gabriel Garcia Marques, Gunter Grass, and John Fowles (see Abrams 1993). Magical events related to violence are interspersed throughout *Red Poppies*. For example, the folk historian Wangpo Yeshi learns how to speak even after his tongue is cut off; the dog that catches the severed portion of Wangpo Yeshi's tongue falls to the ground as if poisoned; and magic pills given to the narrator by a neighboring chieftain produce a mysterious physical reaction. The insertion of magical moments in a generally realistic narration allows Alai to achieve a delicate balance between an idealized, magical Shangri La and an overly realistic, negative portrayal of Old Tibet.

RED AND WHITE

Some critics do not agree that Alai's message is a balanced one. According to Baranovitch (2008), some commentators, such as Tibetan writer and filmmaker Tenzing Sonam, maintain that Alai upholds the official description of how Tibet was 'liberated' by the

Red Army in *Red Poppies* (Baranovitch 2002:171). Yet it appears that Alai creates at least a complex, and perhaps even a pro-Tibetan depiction of the relationship between Tibetans and Han. Of course, the narrator's mother, a central character, is of Han origin, but she is assimilated into Tibetan culture and thus does not share many cultural characteristics with Han arriving from the east.

As the trading town founded by the idiot-son expands, it eventually acquires a brothel run by Han prostitutes. It is these prostitutes that, in addition to the already-prominent poppies, bring yet another Han affliction, this time a disease characterized by a red nose:

When I reached the bridge, I was face-to-face with the chieftains. I saw that many of their noses were redder than before. Yes, I thought, they've contracted syphilis from the girls. I laughed. I laughed at their ignorance of what the girls were carrying. (Alai 2002: 394)

In this way, Old Tibet is viewed as a land where, although men in power displayed loose sexual behavior, syphilis was unknown until it was brought by Han prostitutes, who infected the chieftains.²⁰

The theme of contamination appears in other passages as well. In his rich descriptions of Tibetan material culture, Alai details with great care the vibrant facades of Tibetan architecture:

White permeated our lives. If you had looked at the stone and rammed-earth houses and temples in the chieftain's territory, you'd have seen how much we liked this simple color. Sparkling white quartz was piled above the doorframes and on the windowsills, while the doors and windows were accented in clean,

²⁰ Venereal disease, whether real or mythical, seems to be a common negative association with unfamiliar foreigners. In nineteenth-century America, for example, immoral Chinese women were represented as infecting white men with exotic diseases (Wong 1978:vii):

Whites generally accepted the idea, for instance, that Chinese women in the United States . . . were so debased as to offer their services, at discounted rates, to white schoolboys, imparting in the process a foreign and a presumably exotic strain of venereal disease.

pure white... But now I saw a different kind of white. Sticky whiteness oozed from poppy berries and gathered in a jiggly mass before falling to the ground. The poppies squeezed out their white sap as if the earth were crying. (Alai 2002:79)

The pure, Tibetan white is replaced by the oozing, sticky sap from the poppy plants, perhaps representing the white Kuomintang army, a sort of contamination. The narrator's gaze, just like the focus of daily life in the area, shifts from traditional Tibetan constructions to cultivating the profitable poppy plant.

It is toward the end of the novel, upon the arrival of the Red Army, that a complete inundation with red occurs. It is here that the narrator perceives the difference most clearly between the Han people he has known, such as the Han emissaries and his mother, and the arriving Han, to whom he refers as the 'colored Han':

the colored Han were different - they wanted to dye our land with their own colors ... If the Red Han won the civil war, I heard that they wanted even more to stain every piece of land in that color they revered" (Alai 2002:391-2).

Like a contagious disease, the red color threatens to spread throughout the Maichi land, and we can see here a metaphor of 'red is Han communists'. Eventually, the Red Han win against the White Han (Kuomintang Army), and destroy the Maichi estate house in a shelling. Moments before the final scene, the intuitive narrator provides a foreboding description emphasizing the connection between the Red Han and their destructive fire: "Off in the distance, the Red Han lit bonfires, their flames licking the night sky like the flags they fought under" (Alai 2002:422). Fire, destruction, and Communist symbolism converge in the Tibetan sky.

CONCLUSION: RED AND THE COMPLEXITIES OF ETHNIC IDENTITY

In *Red Poppies*, red is the color of passion and of the Red Han, but also of traditional Tibetan items and beliefs. The year 1949 is often associated in Chinese media with the Red Army marching westward and of a red Communist flag rising over New China. "The East is Red, the sun rises," proclaimed a song during the Cultural Revolution, referring to Mao Zedong and the Party rising over China like a red sun. By using the color red in a complex fashion to represent both Han and Tibetan themes, as well as more complex inter and intra-ethnic distinctions, Alai employs a tool of official propaganda for his own means, creating metaphors that appear in a more subtle, complex, and implicit fashion than when used by propaganda organs, underscoring the lack of subtlety in explicit political symbolism. When Alai *does* portray the Red Han, it is as intruders who bring foreign values and foreign diseases to Tibet, rather than as glorious liberators.

Wang (2013) interprets Alai's message as a counter-narrative to slave liberation, but perhaps it is more complex. Alai situates Jiarong Tibetans in a pluralistic cultural framework, as one of many coexisting cultures, in contrast to the linear Marxist framework proposed by the Chinese government. At the same time, he also depicts the daily life of Jiarong Tibetans, certain aspects of which were quite violent, bringing into question Western idealization of Tibetan daily life as well as romanticized Han portrayal of minorities as feminine, weak, and embracing of the Han majority. The latter may be essential for the Chinese government's Han-centered national ethnic paradigm, and perhaps even to constructing Han identity and the identity of the Chinese nation (Gladney 1994).

Ethnic distinctions and political hierarchies do emerge in Alai's work from contact between Han and Tibetans. However, it is not the Han nationality that is emphasized but the complex and changing identity of Jiarong Tibetans. The constant shifts in perspective and in metaphor use and even our reluctance to completely trust the 'idiot' narrator all contribute to the work's modern qualities. As perspectives shift, the social, political, and

cultural implications of the color red are refitted for that purpose. For readers of the novel's English translation, unusual translation choices, using words associated with medieval Europe, also give the work a western feel. Alai's work provides a multidimensional depiction of Tibetan identity, addressing the very notions of ethnicity, nationality, and China's official ethnic discourse.

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